**‘The Handmaid’s Tale’** by Margaret Atwood

**The author**

Margaret Atwood is Canada’s most eminent novelist, poet and critic. Her first novel, ‘The Edible Woman’ was published in 1969. ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ was first published in 1985 and is her most popular novel. It won the Arthur C Clarke Award for Science Fiction and was short-listed for the Booker Prize.

**The novel**

Like George Orwell’s novel ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’(1949), ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ belongs to the genre of anti-utopian (or dystopian) science fiction. The story is told by a woman and takes the form of a fictive autobiography (someone’s life story, written by him/herself, which is an invention of the imagination, and not fact).

**Other background information**

* The term **handmaid** comes from the Bible. It was another word for a maidservant. According to the Old Testament, Abraham wanted a child and Sara, his wife, was too old so she offered her maid, Hagar, to bear him a child, which she did, Ishmael. So a handmaid was a youngish woman whose sole purpose was to provide a child and heir.
* **Puritanism** was a type of reform movement originating during the English Reformation of the sixteenth century. The name came from efforts to "purify" the Church of England by those who felt that the Reformation had not yet been completed. Eventually the Puritans went on to attempt purification of the self and society as well. The movement held four convictions: (1) that humankind was utterly dependent on God for salvation, (2) that the Bible provided the indispensable guide to life, (3) that the church should be organised according to the express rules of the Scripture, and (4) that God had sanctioned the solidarity of society.

As they gained strength, Puritans were portrayed by their enemies as hairsplitters who slavishly followed their Bibles as guides to daily life; or they were caricatured as hypocrites who gave the appearance of purity but cheated anyone whom they judged to be inadequate Christians. They appeared in drama and satire as secretly lecherous and lacking the piety they pretended to have.

* **Gilead** is named after a place in the Old Testament, a mountainous region east of the Jordan River. It is closely associated with the history of the patriarch Jacob. It was a frontier land and a citadel and therefore provides the ideal image for an embattled state run on fundamentalist religious and patriarchal principles.

The republic of Gilead is a totalitarian state that tries to control not only the lives but also the thoughts of its subjects., silence the opposition at any price, dangers of propaganda and censorship, abuses of language, where the meanings of words are changed to their opposites to try to restructure the way people are allowed to think about their world, eg ‘Aunts’ takes words with reassuring emotional connotations and distorts them into euphemisms for the instruments of oppression.